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Friday, September 6, 2002

### 1. HERBAL NONSENSE: DON'T MESS AROUND WITH MOTHER NATURE.

Even as many of the most popular herbal medications failed miserably when subjected to actual tests ([WN 23 Aug 02](#)), one concoction of saw palmetto, said to include seven Chinese and Indian herbs, seemed to be just as effective in treating prostate cancer as the latest prescription drugs. This was not as remarkable as it seemed: as a natural dietary supplement, PC-SPES could be sold over the counter without proof of purity or effectiveness ([WN 16 Aug 02](#)). But the FDA contended PC-SPES contained prescription-only drugs, and pulled it off the market. It is now confirmed by independent laboratories that PC-SPES contained warfarin, a blood thinner, indomethacin, an analgesic, and synthetic estrogen. These are prescription-only drugs not found in nature.

### 2. PATENT NONSENSE: COURT DENIES BLACKLIGHT POWER APPEAL.

The status of BlackLight Power's intellectual property is fuzzier than ever. BLP was awarded Patent 6,024,935 for "Lower-Energy Hydrogen Methods and Structures," a process for getting hydrogen atoms into a "state below the ground state" ([WN 18 Feb 00](#)). You might expect these shrunken hydrogen atoms, called "hydrinos," to have a pretty special chemistry. Do they ever! Indeed, a second patent application titled "Hydride Compounds" had been assigned a number and BLP had paid the fee. Several other patents were in the works. That's when things started heading South. Prompted by an outside inquiry (who would do such a thing?), the patent director became concerned that this hydrino stuff required the orbital electron to behave "contrary to the known laws of physics and chemistry." The Hydride Compounds application was withdrawn for further review and the other patent applications were rejected. Since the one patent already issued involves the same violations of basic laws of physics, there is a cloud over its status as well. BLP filed suit in federal court arguing that it was too late for the Patent Office to change its mind. The court was not impressed, so BLP appealed the decision. In denying the appeal, the court said the Patent Office has a responsibility to take "extraordinary action" to withdraw a questionable patent. The long-awaited IPO may have to wait a little longer.

### 3. LANCE BASS: MAYBE THE RUSSIANS JUST DON'T LIKE MUSIC.

Russian space officials say the boy-band star stiffed them on the \$20M fare to the ISS, so they evicted him from Star City and gave his seat on Soyuz to a box of supplies. But MirCorp

still needs the don't and deals are still being discussed. is said to involve a major soft drink company. Pepsi and Coke have fought it out in space for years. Mir cosmonauts inflated a giant Pepsi can on a space walk (WN 5 Nov 99), while Coke was involved in developing a \$3M micro-gravity Coke machine that gave only foam when it was tested before a world-wide audience on television.

*Bob Park can be reached via email at [opa@aps.org](mailto:opa@aps.org)*

**THE AMERICAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY and THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND**

Opinions are the author's and are not necessarily shared by the American Physical Society or the University, but they should be.

Comments or Questions?  
Email [webmaster@aps.org](mailto:webmaster@aps.org)  
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# James Randi Educational Foundation

educational resource on the paranormal, pseudoscientific and the supernatural

# WWT

September 20, 2002

line Newsletter of the JREF

Houdini and the Rabbi, The Patent Office Again, A Perpetual Motion/Emotion Car Breaks Down, More Magnetized Water, and Where Are the Penta People.....?

Under Avital Pilpel, who provides us with so many good items, says that he "stumbled upon" an excerpt from a 1948 book, "The Unfailing Rabbi" (1930), the autobiography of Rabbi Dr. David Drachman. The Rabbi was a prominent figure in New York's Jewish community, and was closely connected with the Jewish Theological Seminary in NYC. He died in 1945, aged 84 years.

This is an interesting item, in that it provides us with the views of a well-educated and intelligent rabbi, regarding a matter that has not been well covered by the media and the academic community in general, and about which I have no first-hand knowledge. This is taken from chapter 42 of the book:

A few events of special significance stand out . . . One of these was the passing of Houdini, which occurred, if I recall correctly, in the month of October, 1927.

no, it was in 1926....

It was my sad privilege to officiate at the funeral. His passing became the occasion for the widespread discussion of his personality and the extraordinary powers which he unquestionably possessed. His ability to free himself with astonishing swiftness from chains and padlocks and other means of restraint baffled all investigators.

What these powers were I, of course, know as little as anyone else, but they certainly were far exalted above the vulgar sleight of hand and tricks of ordinary so-called magicians. The Spiritualists claimed Houdini as one of their own and asserted that his escape from apparently insuperable means of confinement was due to his ability to dematerialize his body and thus pass through all physical restraints. Houdini himself denied that he was a Spiritualist medium — he was, indeed, an outspoken opponent of Spiritualism — and stated that his performances were strictly in accordance with natural law.

Rabbi Drachman could have accepted this simple, correct, honest, direct statement from Harry Houdini, but that would seem to require the Rabbi to admit that he did not understand how the apparent miracles of the magician had been accomplished. So, he ascribed special mystical powers to Houdini, forces that no



## HARRY HOUDINI

### Commentary Archi



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not even Houdini himself, could be expected to understand. And that scenario, as to so many others who have wondered about such matters, satisfied the problem. I must differ with his designation of sleight-of-hand as "vulgar." True, some is pretty bad, but even the fumbler among us don't deserve that adjective....

This statement, of course, left the matter as much of a mystery as before. The Spiritualists refused to accept Houdini's denial that he was a medium. They insisted that he was. They even tried to drag me into the controversy as upholding their contention. In my funeral address, I had used the words, "Houdini possessed a wondrous power that he never understood and which he never revealed to anyone in life." These words are to be taken in their narrowest and most literal significance. All I meant was that Houdini possessed an extraordinary and mysterious power — and by that statement I am still willing to stand — the precise nature and quality of which was not clear even to him and that he had never taken anyone into his confidence nor revealed what his concept of his extraordinary gift was.

II, I must tell you that Harry Houdini fully and completely understood his "powers," they were the same as those possessed by magicians from the very first. When a rascally cave-man asked his friend to "Choose a rock, any rock." "Wondrous" only applies from the point of view of the average spectator. And, I must tell you, Houdini's methods and secrets were well-known — to the magicians — in his lifetime. We "in the trade" are well aware of his methods, they are still in use today, and will be in active use when a future mountebank (just kidding!) asks a fair maiden, "Choose a planet, any planet."

But the Spiritualists seized upon these words to draw from them the utterly unjustified inference that I considered Houdini a Spiritualist medium and that his extraordinary powers were derived from a super-mundane, non-material source. Arthur Conan Doyle, the well-known author and Spiritualist leader, interprets them to that effect in his book, "The Edge of the Unknown." [1930] Of course, I meant nothing of the kind. My statement was simply a recognition of his undeniably extraordinary power, concerning the nature of which I admit that I am just as ignorant as everybody else, including A. C. Doyle, neither more nor less.

However, it is not because of this aspect of his personality that I esteemed and respected Houdini and cherish his memory. My respect and, I may say, my love went to him, as a true friend, as a generous and unselfish character, as a loyal and truly filial son, and as a Jew with a warm Jewish heart. As such and for these reasons his name will ever be held in honor as a worthy son of Israel.

And. That last sentence is certainly true and sensible. Harry Houdini was a performer of *apparent* miracles, and not one who claimed his tricks were the real thing. He freely admitted, and in fact insisted, that there was nothing supernatural or abnormal about his abilities, and that in itself should invoke our serious respect. He was a man who because of his fame and his talents could have chosen to claim that was specially gifted, but he did not; he had a deep sense of his ethnic background and tradition, his family responsibilities, and in particular his need for the acceptance of his beloved mother. Not only the Jews, but all of us can rejoice that he was among

Pilpel adds:

Obviously, there is nothing new under the sun. Spiritualists who claimed that Houdini was a medium who wouldn't admit it, moved on to blaming Randi for deliberately using his formidable "psychic powers" to thwart the efforts of would-be challengers to win the foundation's \$1,000,000 prize . . . One would have hoped that the "mediums" and other frauds would at least try to change their *modus operandi* once every fifty years or so. Ah, well....

old Bob Park of the APS (American Physical Society) once more made our  
k for us when he announced that the United States Patent Office was re-  
sidering yet another patent — number 6,024,935, this time — granted to  
klight Power, who will edify you with a pretty heavy description of what they call  
Grand Unified Theory of Classical Quantum Mechanics," if you give them a  
ice. They're at [www.blacklightpower.com](http://www.blacklightpower.com).

patent was for "Lower-Energy Hydrogen Methods and Structures," which they  
ribe as a process for getting hydrogen atoms into a "state below the ground  
," whatever that means. Yes, I'm admitting my ignorance of the subject, but I  
r happily to Bob. The patent involved something called "shrunk hydrogen  
is, called "hydrinos." Bob writes:

... the patent Director became concerned that this hydrino stuff  
required the orbital electron to behave "contrary to the known laws of  
physics and chemistry." The Hydride Compounds application was  
withdrawn for further review and the other patent applications were  
rejected. Since the one patent already issued involves the same  
violations of basic laws of physics, there is a cloud over its status as  
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Patent Office to change its mind. The court was not impressed, so BLP  
appealed the decision. In denying the appeal, the court said the Patent  
Office has a responsibility to take "extraordinary action" to withdraw a  
questionable patent.

o! But why, hard on the heels of re-examining other questionable patents (see  
weeks ago on this page), would the Patent Office have happened upon this  
cular one, when there are so many in this category? The secret can be inferred  
Bob Park's weekly column, where we find: "Prompted by an outside inquiry  
would do such a thing?) ... " That rascal!

very fact that the Patent Office has paid heed to the complaints that Park, the  
F, and others have made, speaks well for rationality. Let's hope that we can look  
ard to many quack devices and systems being re-evaluated. Let's see a lot more  
is "extraordinary action" from the Director. As for Blacklight Power, says Park,  
ir long-awaited IPO may have to wait a little longer."

similar subject, reader David J. Schuller informs us of yet another entry in the  
energy/perpetual motion" racket, a car that was recently scheduled to do  
essive test runs at a big race track, rented for that very purpose. Depend on it,  
scheme, too, will make money while federal trade agencies and law enforcement  
nue to look the other way. Life savings will be lost, and those who can least  
d to go under, will find themselves adrift while the promoters wear a path to their  
s. David tells us...

... of a demo of an electric car which is supposed to recharge itself  
(i.e. perpetual motion). The inventor is Carl Tilley of Lebanon,  
Tennessee, at [www.greaterthings.com/News/Tilley/newstuff/index.html](http://www.greaterthings.com/News/Tilley/newstuff/index.html).  
The car ran a few laps, then conveniently broke down due to  
mechanical failure not associated with the power source. Be sure to  
note the exclamations about the resting voltage measured on the  
batteries (as opposed to measuring under load). Next time they say  
they'll bring two cars instead of one. I'm sure that will be Real Soon  
Now. Be sure to check out the other articles on the web site which  
provide the regular updates: [www.greaterthings.com/News/](http://www.greaterthings.com/News/). It appears  
to be vaguely Christian with a strong interest in conspiracy theories. I'll  
keep an eye on [a local newspaper that covered the event] for a few  
days to see if they do any followup or not. In fact, I think I'll send them a  
note specifically requesting followup.

on a moment. Looking at the  
iter Things" page, I see that these



are not just, as David says, "vague, christian," at all. They're raving loonies! They're very big on quotations, particularly from the Bible, but not much reality. The crazy old "contrails/contrails" thing is discussed, along with the dreaded "666" subject; they tell us that Bill Gates, Saddam Hussein, Gary Kissenger (their spelling), and even Saur Barney, are all represented by the same symbol, and they ponder on whether Prince Charles is actually Satan. The "Bible Code" is a big theme here, too. But the very most potent revelation of all is found in their warning that the US FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) has embarked on imposing "Marshall" (their spelling) on the citizens of the USA, a scheme which is cleverly concealed in their officers' shoulder-badges — seen here — the very same symbol the Canadian Government uses to indicate disaster-escape routes! How could it be any clearer that evil forces are at work here? The text of this warning even tells us that one of the Canadian highway signs was discovered to be located "right IN FRONT of a church"!



Canadian road sign

A famous poet might have said, "An equilateral triangle is an equilateral triangle is an equilateral triangle," or a famous quack psychiatrist could have declared, "Sometimes a triangle is just a triangle."

Let's get back to the "real" science here, while not dismissing the paranoia, of course. (If you did that, people would start talking about you....) The brains on the web site tell us that the twelve 12-volt batteries (!) that run the car are "recharged by a proprietary internal process." Then they reveal the big secret of this process by saying, "The battery gets the motor going, and the motor then feeds energy back to the batteries." This is the method? The mind boggles....

To top off the account of this aborted demonstration of the car, we're informed they didn't get the expected constant feedback from the race track, because the battery on their reporter's cell phone went dead. Seems appropriate.

I'll put in here a simple question for David, who so kindly alerted us to this error. Why do I receive so many of these items written all in lower case, without punctuation or spacing between sentences, and all in one monstrous paragraph? I have to pick through and revise the text, space it, and punctuate it, to make it readable and suitable for use. Are the shift key and space bar that hard to find on a keyboard, David? I'll send you a diagram....

I have been sent a correction of some exchanges I quoted here two weeks ago. I got the attributions and the division wrong. It's a change from this:

[To George] Sure you do. It works just as well as the magic fuel conditioner you sell. *Ad nauseam*, I note that this "demo" would win you a million if you could do it double blind. But you won't even try, because Randi won't accept such a challenge. The studies have been done and demonstrate the difference between magnetically treated and untreated water. Kronenberg published the before and after magnetic treatment pictures and you saw them. Cranfield University has similar before and after pictures on their web site from their studies and you saw them. Trinity College Dublin have before and after pictures from their study and you saw them.

is:

[To John Bain from George] Sure you do. It works just as well as the magic fuel conditioner you sell. *Ad nauseam*, I note that this "demo" would win you a million if you could do it double blind. But you won't even try....

[From John Bain to George] Because I don't accept such a challenge. The studies have been done and demonstrate the difference between magnetically treated and untreated water. Kronenberg published the before and after magnetic treatment pictures and you saw them. Cranfield University has similar before and after pictures on their web site from their studies and you saw them. Trinity College Dublin have before and after pictures from their study and you saw them.

y. That did seem a bit strange when I first saw it. Removing the endless codes transfer text, I sometimes lose important factors. Sorry! And yes, we *will* accept a test, Mr. Bain, just so long as "tap water" or similar water without any added illic compounds, is used. In fact, I e-mailed Mr. Bain as follows:

of course not impossible that magnetic treatment of *specifically-selected* water ples might give the result you claim. The Trinity College account that you cite specifies "mineral water" and "well water." Both these are very general terms, refined, and totally unacceptable. Please do not now report that 'James Randi its that treatment by static magnets alters water in such a manner that a suitably ilive person can detect, by taste, the difference between treated and untreated r.' This is *not* what I'm saying."

Mr. Bain, whether or not we accept the Trinity College material, or the enberg or the Cranfield accounts that you quote, has *nothing to do with your* 7. You have a specific claim. Let's get on with it.

Bain....?

ard Morey from Australia sent us this newspaper article on the same tired, silly subject of weeping, bleeding religious figures:

#### Weeping Statue Draws Crowds

A fiberglass statue of the Virgin Mary bought in Thailand eight years ago has attracted hundreds of sick visitors to the suburban Perth home of Patty Powell. The statue has been claimed by many to be a miracle because it appears to drip a rose-scented oil-like substance from the eyes.

Ms. Powell said when the statue first cried on March 19 this year, she became overwhelmed with grief. "I cried the first time, it felt like my own mother was crying, it was a very humbling experience and really blew me away," she said. She said she was not sure whether it was a personal revelation she had witnessed until the statue "cried again" over the Easter period.

She said the statue, which she said she bought for about \$150 at a religious shop in Bangkok, has since been weeping continuously. "I knew in my heart then what was happening and thought that maybe this was supposed to be seen by more people than just me." Since then, hundreds of people have made the pilgrimage to Ms. Powell's Rockingham home where she has set up a shrine to the Our Lady of Lourdes church to see the statue on display and to touch some of the oil. "The people who come to see her (the statue) are so devout and so reverent, it feels as if my life is just beginning."

She said that she did not know whether the statue would continue to weep or whether she would move it from her home but wanted to take things on a "day-to-day basis at this stage." Ms. Powell said Catholic Archbishop Barry Hickey had seen the statue but had said that as yet, no official proceedings would be made to have the its powers formally recognized by the church.

good. That's refreshing indeed. Hey, folks, grow up! Ask a few basic questions. Are there an adolescent in the house? Anyone else with something to prove? Does Powell herself have an axe to sharpen, here?



Before

After

formed an experiment. This statue, a plaster one that sells for \$1,000, can be improved just by keeping the rascals from secretly squirting oil, perfume, shaving lotion, or cologne, on the lady. See the results!

Under David Bellows writes us about his experience with one of the scams we've handled. We're still waiting to hear from the Penta people, who we understand have been hiding in a cave in Colorado with Sylvia Browne:

I happen to work at a health food store in Atlanta, Georgia. One of our best-selling products is Penta water, in fact we bring in around 200 cases of the stuff every week. I work in the produce section so I do not have much contact with people looking at Penta water. However, since I've been there for over six years people do occasionally seek out my opinion.



Skeptics searching for Sylvia Browne and the Penta executives.....

Recently a man came up to me with three cases of Penta water in his cart (most people buy by the case it seems) and asked me what I thought of it. I told him that it appears to be the same filtered water ("reverse osmosis") we sell for \$.39 a gallon and that there have been no reliable studies conducted to indicate otherwise. He said that he'd been using the water for several months and that it seemed to help him but he couldn't be sure that it wasn't just all in his mind. His use of it is based on the claim that because it is supposedly absorbed better into your cells you'd have less "left-over" water that would be eliminated by urination. This is a concern for him as he is a long-haul truck driver and given that he drinks lots of water while driving he doesn't want to have to pull over for rest stops every fifteen minutes.

I told him that we, as humans and whatever before had been drinking regular old water for thousands, tens of thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of years and our bodies were probably pretty good at handling it by now whether or not it "clusters" like Penta claims. He laughed and said that I'm probably right and put back one of the cases. Small victory (he did still buy two cases) but the important thing is that



it had already occurred to him that with the effects he'd witnessed might possibly not be real.

My comments perhaps provided some confirmation which made it easier for him to put back one of the cases. Of course causing the store to lose sales like this does eventually hurt me in the pocket book, but if people ask my opinion I give it.

(There is a new water being sold in our store called Vivo Water. It claims to "clump" in some beneficial manner. More than a few customers have noted the apparent contradiction in "water theory" between Vivo and Penta. When they ask my opinion all I can do is shrug.)

And, I sometimes think of how embarrassed I would be if I were caught buying Vivo Water or any of the other quack material so widely sold now. Reminds me of the joke that illustrates how mores have changed in recent years:

A teenage boy steps up to the pharmacy counter and loudly declares, "I'll take a dozen of your best condoms!" As the clerk reaches for the merchandise, the kid leans forward and whispers softly to him, "And — a pack of Marlboros...."

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Under Brian S. Lewis chides me about writing: "I have great faith in the Sun rising up tomorrow morning because evidence — my experiences, some 27,073 sunrises to date — have established for me that it's quite probable that the event will occur." He says:

I don't disagree with your point, but there is one small thing that needs saying: there is no logically sound reason to base guesses about the future on events in the past. Perhaps the way that it works is that James Randi is born, and the Sun goes out on his 27,100th day. There is a philosophy thought-problem related to this in which people are having a raffle over the course of a week and are guessing which color god will make the sky. I think I read about it in Simon Blackburn's book, "Think."

What is missing the point here. What author Blackburn refers to are phenomena like flipping a "fair" coin. No "run" or pattern of "heads" (or "tails") can influence the next flip, but the rising of the Sun is something that depends upon huge physical systems already in action, which have been in place for a very long time, that have huge inertia, and that are therefore predictable and dependable. The coin-flipping is an essentially randomized act; the rising of the Sun is not. And remember that I carefully said "quite probable," not "certain," for everything just might vanish ten minutes from now. That's quite improbable, I must add....

Another writer, Sivar, scolded me for having an inaccurate number of Sun-risings in my experience-span. I answered that I was once lost underground in a cave for two weeks (not true, but the best I could come up with), and that I used 365.25 as the number of days in a year, rather than the 365.25625 he used. Okay, if I'm going for points of decimal accuracy, I should have used 365.26.... Picky, picky, picky! Of course, I could get into the choice of a solar, sidereal, or anomalistic year — though I won't.

won't.

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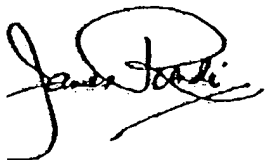
Under Randall Boyce comments:

I am glad you pointed out in your "Survival Without Magic" article that the author wrote it 34 years ago. However, I was offended that you did

not mention the fact that the philosophy of Political Correctness has  
been scientifically proven by some of the greatest thinkers of our time like  
Jesse Jackson and Jane Fonda. Perhaps you need more Sensitivity  
training.

aps.....

is being posted while I'm still in Italy. Since I'll be getting back barely in time to  
are a new page change, the next one may be a bit short...



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